

ADVOCACY NEWS

by Jenny Levy

You like Coffee Don't You? Professional Networking as Immigration Advocacy

"I'd like a grande skim latte, please." You probably utter this phrase, or a similar one, fairly regularly during your work week. Maybe on your way to the office, you stop by that familiar espresso shop with the green awning, or maybe you get your afternoon pick-me-up at the java junction down the road. Either way, heading out for a cup of coffee (au lait, latte, or double cap frap) is probably a comfortable part of your routine.

AILA Advocacy can be just as easy and routine as getting your coffee fix. Mid-South member Mario Ramos met one key staff person from the Nashville Chamber of Commerce for coffee one time and introduced him to the issue of immigration. Two more meetings and two more months later, executive members of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce came to Washington, D.C. to lobby for comprehensive immigration reform.

This article will provide you with a summary of Mario's outstanding advocacy work and a step-by-step plan for you to follow so that you can replicate his successful results. First, read about Mario's outreach effort to engage his local business community in the fight for comprehensive immigration reform. Then, clip and save the step-by-step plans for advanced advocacy! Remember, Advocacy is networking, and that is as routine for a professional attorney as getting a cup of coffee.

Mario Ramos, Advanced Advocate: Engaging the Business Community

In a member-to-member interview with AILA Grassroots Committee member Gerry Chapman, Mario answered questions about his motivation and strategy for working with the Nashville Chamber of Commerce. From their conversation, Gerry culled the following information to share with interested AILA members.

Mario became more engaged with AILA Advocacy last year during the fight to defeat the REAL ID Act (Pub. L. No. 109-13, 119 Stat. 231 (May 11, 2005)) in Congress. He worked in coalition with community leaders to mobilize advocates around the state to educate senators and representatives about the threats to civil liberties and due process imposed by the REAL ID Act. Because of his outstanding leadership on this field effort, AILA staff encouraged Mario to join the Grassroots Committee, and he did so just in time to start strategizing with other AILA members about local advocacy efforts to support Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) in the House and Senate.

After a few conference calls with the Committee, Mario became determined to engage non-traditional immigration advocates in the pro-immigrant movement. He said, "My goal is to convert the unconverted, preaching to ethnic Chambers is preaching to the choir. I want to increase the pro-immigration reform network by focusing on mainstream Chambers." He intentionally targeted mainstream business-focused community groups that have an interest in employing foreign-born workers, and so he sought out professionals at the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce and the Middle Tennessee Homebuilders Association.

He evaluated the contacts in his personal network and wondered if any of them could help him find the right person at either of his targeted groups. In his search, Mario found the name and information of a prominent attorney and business executive in the Nashville area, whom he had met briefly during a leadership seminar a year or so before. That contact was recently hired by the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce to serve as the Senior Vice President of Government Relations and Community Improvement.

Once he realized the connection, Mario called his contact, and they set up a meeting to discuss the harmful impact that overly punitive, enforcement-only federal immigration legislation could have on local business. In his interview, Mario said, “I used their interests to guide their support of comprehensive immigration reform. I focused on business-related issues, *i.e.*, their self-interest.” After their initial conversation and coffee meeting, it was clear that the Chamber could be convinced to be key advocates for immigration reform in the state of Tennessee. Mario also realized he would need to promote the objectivity and specialized knowledge that AILA brings to the immigration debate.

Because Mario kept AILA Advocacy staff abreast of his outreach efforts, he was able to quickly provide his contact with updated legislative analysis of pending bills, fact sheets, position papers, and specific information about members of the national business community who publicly support comprehensive immigration reform. He also was able to arrange a breakout meeting with the Chamber executive and Jenny Levy, AILA’s Manager of Grassroots Advocacy, who was in town for the Mid-South Chapter meeting.

As he worked to leverage his relationship with the Chamber of Commerce, Mario was contacted by some of the local immigrants’ rights groups, churches, and individuals to work together to meet with members of the business community. Out of concern for alienating the Chamber before they had solidified their support for comprehensive immigration reform, he chose not to pursue this collective strategy.

He continued to pursue the Chamber and attended various local events such as forums and receptions to get to know more leadership and executives at the organization. While there, he continually talked about immigration in terms of economic development and the ways that foreign-born workers could contribute to the local economy. His work spurred the Chamber to include immigration reform as one of their five annual legislative priorities. When the Nashville Chamber’s executive lobbying group visited Capitol Hill to meet with its state’s senate and congressional delegations, the group made a special focus on immigration. Mario informed AILA National staff that the Nashville Chamber would be in D.C. so that staff could prepare the lobbying group to speak about current immigration legislation.

Because of Mario’s outreach, the Chamber and other business groups in Nashville and the metro area, expressly seek AILA to help guide their efforts. He explained that “[t]hese groups have virtually no immigration knowledge and they seek our help [to teach them about the impact that immigration policy could have their business].”

For Mario, convincing diverse groups that comprehensive immigration reform is a non-partisan issue is easy if one considers the needs and interests of the target audience. “Going back to network theory, we need to join the interest of AILA to business networks. They seek our technical expertise and knowledge of immigration law.” AILA needs the support of the business community in order to win comprehensive immigration reform. Instead of telling the Chamber of Commerce why they should help AILA, Mario told the Nashville Chamber of Commerce why they need comprehensive immigration reform and that AILA can help them to achieve it.

You can leverage your professional relationships to help AILA advocacy. Follow these 10 steps to learn how!

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Replicate Mario Ramos's Advanced Advocacy in 10 Steps!
Step-by-Step Plan for Working with the Business Community

1. Identify target association or organization.
2. Do Your Research — Identify your target's needs, interests, and motivation. Determine the value you bring to your target.
3. Determine a specific goal that you want your target to accomplish (e.g., an in-district meeting with a member of Congress, attend an event, or write an op-ed).
4. Carefully consider your outreach strategy and identify which partners, if any, will enhance the message you share with your target audience.
5. Evaluate your personal and professional networks and determine which contacts can help you meet someone from your target.
6. Have coffee or other meeting with your target.
7. Keep in touch with AILA staff and work together to reach your target audience and objective. Try to coordinate opportunities for AILA staff to meet directly with your contact.
8. Be visible in your target community by attending events they host. Build relationships with their leadership and decision-makers.
9. Share your expertise with your target by alerting them to local articles or events that are of joint interest for you both.
10. Commit to maintaining the relationship so that you can jointly accomplish your predetermined goal.